

All We Imagine as Light: A tender real-life story about Mumbai health workers

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Writer/director Payal Kapadia's first dramatic feature, the cryptically entitled *All We Imagine as Light*, explores the lives of three working-class women at a Mumbai hospital during the monsoon season.

Prabha (Kani Kusruti) and Anu (Divya Prabha), who are migrant nurses from Kerala state, and Parvaty (Chhaya Kadam), a hospital canteen worker originally from Ratnagiri in southern Maharashtra, get to know each other at the hospital and become friends.

Low pay, long working hours, high rents, cramped living conditions, and the ever-present class and religious prejudices imposed on single women in India, make life a constant struggle in the demanding and socially polarised megacity.

Prabha, a head nurse, is sharing accommodation with Anu, who is in love with Shiaz (Hridhu Haroon), a young Muslim man, a taboo relationship for a Hindu woman.

Anu is determined to maintain her semi-secret affair, a relationship that would be frowned upon by both their parents. Prabha is uncomfortable with Anu's youthful self-confidence but refuses to get involved in hospital gossip about the young woman.

Prabha is married but never really got to know her husband before their arranged wedding and his departure for Germany not long after. She has not heard from him for years. While Prabha is lonely and desperately hopes that her husband will return, she will not allow herself to get involved with Manoj (Azees Nedumangad), a shy hospital doctor attracted to her.

One day Prabha receives an unexpected parcel containing a large red rice cooker. It could be from her husband but there is no message or return address. The only clue is the "Made in Germany" label on the bottom of the cooker. In one of the film's understated but haunting moments, she sits alone on the floor of the

shared apartment late one night, tearfully embracing the gift.

Prabha and Anu become friends with Parvaty, whose husband has recently died. She is being threatened by thugs from a real estate developer who plans to bulldoze the area and build high-rise luxury units.

Parvaty and her family have lived in the tiny one-room dwelling with shared toilet facilities for over 20 years, having been told that they own it. But like thousands of other workers being evicted by get-rich-quick developers across the city, she has no legal documents to proof her ownership.

Parvaty is ordered to leave the property within days and just before the Ganpala Festival, a major holiday on Mumbai's religious calendar. Prabha and Parvaty seek out a well-to-do lawyer for assistance but all he offers is sympathy. They later attend a union meeting where a female official calls for unity to fight the developers.

Buoyed by the meeting, the two women vent their anger against a property developer's streetside billboard. The advert arrogantly declares, "Luxury living redefined: CLASS is a privilege reserved for the PRIVILEGED."

At one point in the film, an anonymous voiceover says, "Some people call this a city of dreams, but I think it's a city of illusions. There's an unspoken code in this city: even if you're in the gutter, you're not allowed to feel anger. People call this the spirit of Mumbai. You have to believe the illusion or else you'll go mad."

Facing homelessness and fed up with the "illusions," Parvaty decides to return home to Ratnagiri, about several hundred kilometres down the coast. Prabha and Anu travel with Parvaty, helping her set up home in a coastal shack. Freed from the daily pressures of life and

work in Mumbai, the three women relax and begin to make some decisions about their future lives.

Kapadia's movie does not attempt to present Ratnagiri as an idyllic alternative to Mumbai, Parvaty's shack has no electricity or even a toilet.

Nor does it suggest that the nurses' temporary escape from Mumbai and the difficult social pressures imposed on these migrant workers, is a permanent solution for these women. The trip down south, however, marks an optimistic turning point in their lives.

All We Imagine as Light is an enthralling story with strong performances, evocative cinematography by Ranabir Das, especially his monsoon-season night shots of Mumbai, and effective use of Ethiopian composer Emahoy Tsegue-Maryam Guebrou's intriguing piano music. The movie's portrayal of Anu's love affair with Shiaz is also an important antidote to the anti-Islamic hysteria of the Hindu fundamentalist Modi government and its backers.

This is a film free of the faux heroes and bombast that generally dominates contemporary cinema but is an honest portrait of the lives of ordinary people—the real heroes of everyday life in Mumbai and other megacities around the world.

In 1951, Satyajit Ray, arguably India's greatest director, reviewed Vittorio Di Sica's *The Bicycle Thief*, hailing it as “a triumphant rediscovery” of the fundamentals of the cinema. The simple “universality of its theme, the effectiveness of its treatment, and the low cost of its production,” he wrote, “make it the ideal film for the Indian filmmaker to study.

“The present blind worship of technique emphasises the poverty of genuine inspiration among our directors. For a popular medium, the best kind of inspiration should derive from life and have its roots in it. No amount of technical polish can make up for artificiality of theme and dishonesty of treatment. The filmmaker must turn to life, to reality,” Ray said.

All We Imagine as Light seems to be underpinned by this wise advice.

Kapadia's film premiered at last year's Cannes Film Festival where it won the prestigious Grand Prix and is still winning numerous international film awards and well-deserved critical praise.

The Film Federation of India (FFI), which each year selects what movie it will submit to the Oscar's Best Foreign Language award, however, failed to nominate

All We Imagine as Light. Jahnu Barua, who headed the 13-member selection committee, later claimed that the jury considered the film to be “very poor technically.”

Responding to widespread criticism over the decision, FFI President Ravi Kottarakara told the media that the committee felt that “they were watching a European film taking place in India, not an Indian film taking place in India.”

In fact, *All We Imagine as Light* is screening across India, with distribution deals in more than fifty countries and available on several streaming services in the US, a rare achievement for a low-budget independent film. This is significant. Kapadia's humane and sensitive film transcends its national origins, and the situation confronting its protagonists, and powerfully speaks to the issues facing millions of workers across the globe.



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